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Perkins, George W.

Why American labor is back of the war

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[1918]

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WHY AMERICAN LABOR IS BACK OF THE WAR

By George W. Perkins,
President of Cigar Makers' I. U.

Reprinted from The Granite Cutters' Journal
(June, 1918).

Why is American organized labor so unanimously supporting the Government in its war to a finish against autocracy?

If all of you who read this article had been with me in Germany the year before the great war broke out you would have no need to ask. You would have seen, as I saw, autocracy at work, intimidating and coercing labor, spying on it, policing its meetings, suppressing free speech. When all these methods failed, you would have seen as I saw, autocracy trying to corrupt labor, misleading it by insidious propaganda, seeking to raise up false leaders, and using the power of money and influence to debauch those who seek to mitigate the condition of the workers. You would have returned, as I did, thankful to be permitted to live in a land of freedom and democracy, and resolved, as I was, if ever our liberties were menaced by the powers of autocracy, to fight to the death; to work to the limit; to make every sacrifice, and to accept no compromise until autocracy, such as is typified by the present German Government, is defeated in a finish fight and the militarism which keeps it in power is crushed forever from the face of the earth.

I went to Europe in the early fall of 1913 as representative of the American Federation of Labor to the World's Congress—the International Federation of Trade Unions, at Zurich, Switzerland. Like the representative of the organized labor movements of the other nations, I went as a poor man, resolved to make the trip just as cheaply as pos-

sible, because labor has no money to spend on the junketings of its representatives. I went there for work, not for pleasure.

But Switzerland is on the borders of Germany. Zurich was filled with supposed leaders of the labor movement of Germany. They were not delegates, but, somehow, they were there. They were not poor men, if the way they spent money was any indication. They seemed to have unlimited funds.

Their mission seemed to be to spend money. We have always supposed that the "Dutch Treat" originated in Germany, but somehow these men from Germany seemed never to have heard of it. Their sole aim, apparently, was to wine and dine the representatives of other countries. They would invite a man to luncheon or dinner, under pretext that they wished to consult him on some important matter. He would find, as I found more than once, that the matter would be just about as important as the question of whether adjournment should be taken at 12 o'clock or five minutes to 12. In fact it often would be hard to discern any matter at all which would warrant this sudden manifestation of friendship and interest.

But the conversation always drifted around to the interests of Germany in the world, its superiority, and the utter futility of anyone standing out against it. The aim, apparently, was to make friends for Germany. It took the world war, however, to reveal the full meaning and extent of what these propagandists were driving at.

When it came to paying the check some of those Germans were there with bells on. I don't know where they got the money. Just go and look in on the headquarters of some of the German unions, or visit the homes of some of the German workers and see if you think they got the money there.

For years before this war broke out the dream of sentimental internationalists of the world had been to prevent international strife by general strikes in case of wars of conquest. At a meeting several years ago of the miners' representatives from many lands, an English delegate proposed a resolution providing that in the event of a war of aggression the miners of both countries involved should refuse to dig coal. The German delegation said that if such a resolution was even introduced they would have to withdraw, for if they even sat in a meeting in which such a resolution was discussed they would be tried and executed for treason.

The same thing has happened on other occasions. The German delegates always knew they would have to refuse to have anything to do with any proposal to interfere with their government's plans for world conquest, or face a firing squad.

My personal experience while studying the labor movement in Germany was such as to make me more than ever absolutely and unqualifiedly back of our government in this war. I found absolutely no democracy in the German labor movement. No meeting of workingmen could be held in Germany without government police supervision. No one could speak in a foreign tongue at any labor meeting, without first submitting his speech to the autocratic government, having it censored, and being given a permit to make the address.

I could not speak at a meeting of cigarmakers called for organization purposes because I would first have had to submit in writing a copy of my speech. This would have had to be translated into German, blue penciled by some representative of an autocratic government, and translated back into English for the Kaiser's minion to tell me what I could say. Before all this red tape could have been gone through with, the day for the meeting would have passed, if I had consented to try to go through with it at all.

For years, in Germany, formation of labor unions was absolutely prohibited. Workers had to meet secretly, and in imminent peril of arrest. When the German Government finally saw the workers could not be intimidated in this way, it grudgingly granted permission to organize, but under so many restrictions that any true expression of labor's aims and desires was impossible.

Our forebears disputed the demands of kings and potentates. Rebelling against religious intoler-

ance and social injustice they started our first great war. It was successful.

The second great crisis of our nation brought on the war for the elimination of human slavery. It, too, was successful.

Now we are at an even greater crisis. We are fighting that democracy, liberty and justice shall not perish from the earth. Again we must and we will be successful.

The time for argument is past. The pacifist's cowardly pleas are dead. You must now be either pro-American or pro-German; pro-democracy or pro-autocracy. There can be no falling back; no wavering. All of us must be heart and soul for democracy and victory, or for autocracy, militarism and slavish subjection.

This pamphlet is reprinted and circulated by the National Security League (19 West 44th Street, New York City), which is a non-political, non-partisan league of American men and women who are doing effective work in promoting patriotic knowledge.

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